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Corporate purchasing practices in global production networks: A socially contested terrain

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ABSTRACT

Civil society organisations are employing both adversarial and collaborative strategies to challenge purchasing practices of large corporations as a cause of poor employment conditions for a largely female workforce. This paper draws on analysis of global production networks, labour agency and gender to examine linkages and tensions at the intersection between commercial dynamics of dominant firms and their societal embeddedness in diverse localities of consumption and production. It contrasts two campaigns, one adversarial, the other collaborative, on corporate purchasing practices pursued by smaller, women-oriented NGOs to improve working conditions of a feminised labour force in fruit and garment GPNs. It analyses how the positioning of lead firms within GPNs affects their engagement with social actors. Brand exposure to reputational risk allows civil society organisations to exploit leverage points opened up at different GPN nodes to pressure for commercial change. It argues this is not coincidental. It often plays out within a gender contested terrain where women workers bear the brunt of adverse purchasing practices. But GPNs also open up new channels for women's voice and organisation. The paper considers the extent to which these forms of civil society engagement reflect a fundamental challenge to GPNs, or new forms of incorporation by firms adapting to their social critics. It assesses this in light of a process of gender transformation within global markets, where women now participate as more informed workers, consumers and activists.

1. Introduction

Civil society campaigns are increasingly challenging the commercial purchasing practices of lead buyers as a driver of poor working conditions in their supply base. This represents a move beyond ethical trade focused mainly on social compliance with labour codes towards targeting the mainstream business operations of leading firms (Raworth and Kidder, 2009; Hughes et al., 2010). This paper examines how different civil society organisations have targeted or engaged with large corporate buyers over poor purchasing practices in relation to their suppliers in developing countries. Non-government organisations (NGOs) and trade unions argue that buyers subject suppliers to commercial pressures – through downward price pressures and flexible ordering systems – which underpin many poor working conditions, such as low wages, long overtime and casualised contracts (Oxfam, 2004; ActionAid, 2007).

This paper examines how campaigns on this issue have involved different strategies – some based on adversarial campaigns, others on alliances with companies. NGOs and trade unions are pursuing different strategies and leverage points to target the commercial activities of companies involved in global sourcing. The paper draws on the analysis of global production networks (GPNs) to examine why these diverse strategies have arisen, often with a gender focus. It considers the extent to which these forms of civil society engagement reflect a fundamental challenge to companies in GPNs. Or do they reflect new forms of incorporation, in light of a process of gender transformation within global markets, where women now participate as more informed workers, consumers and activists?

Analysis of global production networks helps to examine the changing terrain of engagement between companies and civil society organisations. It facilitates analysis of the linkages and tensions between commercial and societal spheres: firstly, networks of firms and agents across international boundaries driven by a commercial dynamic; and, secondly, networks of civil society actors, consumers and workers linked across diverse country contexts driven by social motivation (Coe et al., 2008). Often these spheres have been explored separately in the literature. The commercial dimension has been examined in some depth through global value chain (GVC) analysis (Gereffi et al., 2001, 2005). However, its limitation has been a narrow focus on firm-level activities. Parallel

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literatures on labour agency and global civil society have examined the transformation of employment. This has highlighted changing power asymmetries between civil society and commercial actors as outsourcing has transcended national labour markets and organisation (Munck, 2002; Castree et al., 2004). The link between economic processes of globalisation and gender relations has been insufficiently examined (Nagar et al., 2002; Beneria, 2007). Case studies have highlighted gendered forms of labour and civil society activism, particularly in promoting the rights of women and vulnerable workers (Barrientos et al., 2003; Hale and Wills, 2005). Whilst each set of literatures provides important insights, they have largely developed in parallel, with insufficient exploration of the connections between the commercial and social dimensions of global sourcing.

GPN analysis helps to bridge the gap, by highlighting the societal embeddedness of companies engaged in commercial sourcing through networks of suppliers in the global south (Dicken et al., 2001; Henderson et al., 2002). GPNs transcend traditionally discrete or arms length market operations, which conventional economics has long assumed are divorced from social interactions. From a commercial perspective, lead firms increasingly coordinate production, distribution and retail to position themselves within a competitive global market. They have a consumer-facing orientation aimed at increasing market share and shareholder returns. At the same time, outsourcing to developing countries in search of cheaper production enmeshes lead firms in the social norms and employment practices of those countries. Consumers in the North are more aware of social issues in developing countries, through travel and internet access, leading to rising ethical and moral concerns (Clarke et al., 2007; Hughes et al., 2008). This has opened up space for transnational civil society networks to campaign around poor working conditions and lack of labour rights (Levy, 2008).

There is an important gender dimension to this process which is often overlooked. Many women have been drawn into the paid workforce often through the flexibilisation of employment (Standing, 1999) that is increasingly found within GPNs. Rising female incomes have contributed to the commercialisation of consumption traditionally undertaken privately in the home. As consumers (particularly in developed countries) women have greater independent spending power, and research indicates they can bring a more 'caring' perspective to purchasing decisions (Beetles and Harris, 2005; Beneria, 2007). As workers (particularly in developing countries), women have often provided the basis for cheap production based on poor and insecure working conditions, becoming a focal point of many NGO campaigns over labour rights (Clarke et al., 2007; Hughes et al., 2010).

This paper draws on a GPN perspective to explore how civil society strategies can vary, depending on whether they target the commercial (risk) or social embeddedness (caring) dimension of corporate engagement. This is reflected in divergent strategies adopted by NGOs, some involving alliances with companies, and others more adversarial campaigns, in order to influence corporate behaviour. The paper compares two cases where smaller, women-oriented NGOs have used diverse strategies to target companies' mainstream commercial practices by exploiting different leverage points opened up within GPNs. Both have a gender focus and, despite limited resources, have been able to target the commercial operations of large multi-national companies. One, a South African NGO, Women on Farms (WoF) (with nine staff members), pursued an adversarial campaign, working with ActionAid and War on Want in the UK, to pressure the supermarket Tesco over poor conditions of fruit workers in its supply chain (ActionAid, 2005; WoW, 2008). The other, a UK NGO, Women Working Worldwide (WWW) (with four staff members), pursued a more collaborative approach by engaging with the global brand Gap Inc as part of the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) purchasing practices group, to examine how buying decisions could be modified to ameliorate effects on women workers (WWW, 2003).

A GPN lens helps to provide insights into the complexity of commercial–social inter-linkages and tensions this generates. It facilitates more integrated analysis of both the commercial drivers behind corporate purchasing practices, and how GPNs have opened up new sites of bargaining and struggle across countries (Coe et al., 2008; Levy, 2008; Neilson and Pritchard, 2009). Analysis of value chains enables NGOs to identify and pursue new leverage points across GPNs in order to pressure companies to change their purchasing practices. This opens up new space for smaller, women-oriented NGOs to target large corporates.[1] Finally, the paper draws on wider critiques of ethical and fair trade (Blowfield and Dolan, 2008; Levy, 2008) to consider the extent to which these different forms of civil society engagement reflect a challenge to the prevailing commercial model. It examines to what extent they reflect new forms of incorporation within evolving global commercial processes as dominant companies adapt to pressures in the social environment within which they are embedded? The paper considers this in the context of transformation in gendered norms through changing construction of global markets (Beneria, 2007), opening up new channels for the voice of marginal women workers to be heard.

2. Purchasing practices campaign

Outsourcing to developing countries as a conduit of cheaper consumer goods has been a key feature of globalisation since the 1980s. NGOs and trade unions in the global North have long campaigned around poor working conditions in the South, stimulating many companies to adopt codes of labour practices (Hughes, 2001; Barrientos and Smith, 2007). However, NGOs engaged in ethical trade have increasingly focused on the commercial purchasing practices of buyers and retailers as an underlying reason for the limitations of corporate codes (WWW, 2003; Oxfam, 2004; Traidcraft, 2006; ActionAid, 2007; Hughes et al., 2010). Their key concern is that large brands and retailers take advantage of their dominant commercial power to maximise margins and market share by offsetting risks and costs onto weaker suppliers and vulnerable workers within their value chains. Commercial pressures on suppliers include: lowering of prices; rising standards paid for by the supplier; shortening lead times from the placement of an order to delivery; increasing the number of small repeat orders rather than placing single large advance orders; plus the use of insecure contracts or sealed bids to spurn competition between suppliers (Acona, 2004; Oxfam, 2004).

It is significant that purchasing practices campaigns often have a gender focus, highlighting the fact that suppliers offset the associated costs and risks onto a largely female workforce. Early case studies in horticulture and apparel had indicated that downward pressure on costs stimulates employment of low-wage female workers, increases casualisation of labour or drives sub-contracting to sweatshops and/or labour contractors (WWW, 2003; Barrientos and Kritzinger, 2004; Hale and Wills, 2005). The launch of the Oxfam study, *Trading Away Our Rights* (Oxfam, 2004; Raworth and Kidder, 2009), under the 'Gender Wedge' of their trade campaign galvanised NGO and trade union concerns around purchasing practices. It coincided with the publication of a report by the consultancy firm Acona, commissioned by Insight Investment (a financial asset manager), which provided a detailed analysis of the commercial dimensions of poor sourcing practices (Acona, 2004). A key point arising from the Oxfam study was that companies often deployed purchasing practices that conflicted

[1] 'Corporates' is used here to refer to legally registered companies with limited liabilities, owned by shareholders and controlled by a Board of Directors.

with their own code of labour practice applied to the same suppliers. For example, a company's buyer would demand a cut in lead time or suddenly increase their order size, even though meeting that order would necessitate compulsory overtime working that violated the limits stipulated by their own code. This could have severe consequences for women workers juggling domestic responsibilities, especially if they had to arrange childcare provision, often without notice (Smith et al., 2004).

Civil society organisations have adopted different strategies in targeting purchasing practices, reflecting contrasting positions in relation to corporate engagement. Some have engaged with companies through alliances such as the UK Ethical Trading Initiative. Others have remained aloof, pursuing a more adversarial approach. Following the publication of the Oxfam and Acona reports, the ETI established a Purchasing Practices working group in 2005, comprising representatives from companies, trade unions and NGO members.[2] The aim was to link individual companies with a partner NGO or trade union to examine the effect of purchasing practices within their supply chain (ETI, 2005; Hughes et al., 2010). However, other UK-based NGOs addressing corporate issues, notably ActionAid and War on Want, remained outside the ETI. They pursued more aggressive media-based campaigns around corporate purchasing practices, often with a focus on women workers (ActionAid, 2007; WoW, 2008). In response to purchasing practices campaigns by civil society organisations, some buyers argue that efficient and innovative suppliers are able to raise productivity and maintain labour standards, and cannot be shielded in a competitive commercial environment.[3] Other companies have responded by examining their own value chain operations, working in collaboration with NGOs and trade unions as a means of addressing the issues (such as those in the ETI working group). Before exploring these mixed responses further, we need to analyse the commercial and social dynamics that underpin both the buying strategies of large companies, and the positioning of civil society actors campaigning on corporate issues.

3. Global production networks: Commercial and social dynamics of outsourcing

Global production network analysis helps to link exploration of the commercial dynamics of contemporary production, employment and trade with societal embeddedness of commercial activity. This provides a conceptual framework for examining the inter-linkages and tensions between different networks of commercial and social actors, in a context where power asymmetries are prescient. These networks operate across international boundaries, with both consumption and production 'touching down' in quite diverse social and institutional country contexts (Dicken et al., 2001; Henderson et al., 2002; Coe et al., 2008). However, the role of labour agency and civil society as mediating actors at the intersection of the commercial and social dimensions has only begun to receive serious attention in the literature on GPNs (Cumbers et al., 2008; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010). Separate but parallel bodies of literature on global value chains, labour agency and gender help to supplement insights provided by a GPN approach. Here we explore each before drawing out the implications for a more integrated analysis of purchasing practices.

The literature on global value chains (GVCs) provides insights into the commercial dynamics underpinning purchasing practices. A key aspect is the way in which the commercial power of lead firms facilitates the extraction of economic surplus from weaker suppliers from whom they source. These 'economic rents' are acquired through concentration on 'value added' consumer-oriented activities, such as design, branding and cultivation of market niches (Kaplinsky, 1998). An important reason behind the ability of lead firms to extract economic rents is their oligopolistic position in relation to a fragmented global supply base. This relationship has been described as akin to a bargaining model, in which the commercial power of buyers predominates (Nathan and Kalpana, 2007; Coe et al., 2008). Analysis of governance structures in value chains also helps to examine the role played by dominant lead firms in value chains (Kaplinsky and Morris, 2002; Gereffi et al., 2005). Governance has been associated with the rise of private standards which have facilitated new forms of coordination by buyers across a diverse global sourcing base (Dolan and Humphrey, 2004; Henson and Humphrey, 2008). This includes the rise of codes of labour practice, as global brands have sought to limit reputational damage from media exposure for poor working conditions in their supply base. Standards have increasingly become a minimum point of entry to value chains. Compliant suppliers are rarely given preferential treatment, and they usually have to bear the costs of implementation, compounding the pressures from buyers. Whilst GVC analysis provides important insights into the commercial dynamics involved, a limitation has been its firm-centred focus, with little exploration of labour or the broader social context in which firms operate (Barrientos et al., 2003; Pelger and Knorringa, 2007; Bair, 2008).

A parallel but often separate literature has examined changing patterns of work through the outsourcing of production to lower cost developing countries. This has highlighted the feminisation of flexible employment and the role of labour agency (Standing, 1999; Munck, 2002; Barrientos et al., 2003; Hale and Wills, 2005; Kabeer, 2000). Female employment has facilitated expanding export demand for higher quality goods whilst lowering the labour costs of production. An important aspect has been drawing on women's socially engendered skills, in order to enhance quality at low levels of remuneration (Elson, 1981; Collins, 2003; Barrientos and Kritzinger, 2004). Low pay and lack of social benefits for female workers transfers the costs of reproduction onto the (often female) worker and their household. It facilitates higher levels of 'value capture' at the buyer end of supply chains, enhancing economic rents to lead firms. Gender discrimination is thus exploited as a low-cost source of value enhancement. 'Just-in-time' pressures from buyers increase the demand for flexibility from workers. This includes compulsory overtime and the use of casual workers, whose numbers can be altered on a daily basis depending on the flow of orders (Hale and Wills, 2005; Barrientos, 2008; Raworth and Kidder, 2009). Women juggling their productive and reproductive roles, with few alternative sources of income, are in a weak bargaining position to resist such pressures. Hence women workers are often the weakest link in a commercial process, acting as a buffer at the bottom of the purchasing practices chain. This has spurred civil society initiatives around 'ethical trade' and codes of labour practice to improve workers' rights (Barrientos and Smith, 2007).

A challenge in analysing the purchasing practices debate is to unpack the complex interactions between the commercial and social dimensions of outsourcing. There has long been academic debate over the relation between economic and social activity and the role of broader institutional actors (Granovetter, 1985; Chan, 2003; Hess, 2004; Hamilton and Gereffi, 2008). Conventional economic analysis, based on assumptions of perfect competition and 'free market' exchange between buyers and sellers and free trade, abstracts in principle from any social or institutional influence. In

[2] The following are members were members of the ETI Purchasing Practices group in 2008. Company members: Asda, Debenhams, Gap, Inditex, Marks and Spencer, New Look, Next and W.H. Smith. Trade union members: International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation, Prospect, Transport and General Workers Union (UNITE). NGO members: CAFOD, Homeworkers Worldwide, Oxfam, Traidcraft, Women Working Worldwide.

[3] Personal communication with individual buyers in interviews conducted in phase one of this research (see research methods in Section 4).

contrast, critical institutional analysis emphasised that development of a market economy is not a natural process, but one that is socially constructed (Polanyi, 1944). Here the economy is no longer subordinate to society, but 'social relations are embedded in the economic system' (Polanyi, 1944, p. 57). As markets advance, their excesses need to be curbed by social forces or the state, in what Polanyi described as a 'double movement'. A gendered analysis highlights that markets involve a division of labour between 'public' productive space and 'private' reproductive space. Women are mostly concentrated in the latter through embedded social norms. The construction of markets as socially embedded institutions therefore has an important gender dimension, which is changing through globalisation (Beneria, 2007).

In this context, GPN analysis has emphasised the importance of embeddedness of firms at three levels: *territorially* in terms of location; through *networks* operating beyond national borders through the relationships and level of trust they establish; and *societally* through engagement with institutional norms and actors beyond the narrow commercial sphere (Hess, 2004). This opens up space for analysis of the complex interactions between the commercial and social dimensions of production and distribution as underpinning the purchasing practices debate. Firms operating within GPNs simultaneously strive for profit and market share in a competitive environment through value capture, whilst balancing and influencing changing consumer preferences shaped by wider moral values, social and environmental concerns (Coe et al., 2008). At heart, it can be argued, there is an inherent tension between the commercial and social dimensions of GPNs: on the one hand, through disembodied commodities (market relations) that extend across borders via global outsourcing, driven by a commercial imperative; on the other hand, coordinated networks of actors that are societally embedded in local social norms and values. Through globalisation consumer-oriented lead firms have become both more alert to reputational risk, and also more responsive to changing awareness and social values of consumers, who are often influenced by access to social networking and information sharing.

Until recently GPN analysis has been limited in its exploration of labour, which has tended to be appended at the end of more insightful commercial analysis (Cumbers et al., 2008; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010). Integration of labour into GPN analysis is increasing, as attested by this special edition. Gender relations are another aspect often overlooked in GVC/GPN analysis (Barrientos et al., 2003). Yet they are central to the social context in which non-commercial actors and civil society campaigns are able to influence the commercial dynamic of coordination by lead firms.

A crucial aspect underpinning this process is the asymmetries of power between commercial and social actors in GPNs. The concept of power highlights the ability of one group to be able to exert control, or have 'power over' another group in some way. It also involves the 'power to' engage in different forms of resistance in relation to those with power over them (Nelson and Wright, 1995; Rowlands, 1998). Within GPNs, companies have commercial power at their disposal resulting from their control of economic, financial and technical resources. In contrast, workers have minimal power, as their only asset is their ability to labour. Trade unions face challenges operating in a globalised labour market where labour relations are increasingly influenced by global buyers operating outside the national sphere of labour regulation and collective bargaining (Waterman and Wills, 2001; Munck, 2002; Cumbers et al., 2008). Women workers are often the most disadvantaged, given they are often in casual or insecure employment and poorly organised. Asymmetries of power are gendered in social contexts where women have long played a subordinate, unpaid role in the private sphere. They combine multiple burdens of paid work with domestic and child care, and typically face gendered constraints on access to resources generated through markets (Beneria, 2007).

Tension between the commercial and social dimensions of GPNs opens up a contradictory process that can be contested across global and local space at the levels of both consumption and production. Whilst control of resources is necessary, it is not always sufficient in a context where power can be contested through other means (Dicken et al., 2001; Newell, 2002; Coe et al., 2008). New forms of global networking and social media allow civil society organisations to contest the commercial power of firms by exerting social influence across developed and developing countries, reflected in the rise of ethical and fair trade within mainstream retailing (Levy, 2008). Globalisation has facilitated travel and information flows to consumers, increasing awareness and concern about the conditions under which goods are sourced in poorer countries. In this context, ethical consumption has been associated with the 'ethics of care', in which ethical and moral considerations for 'distant others' influences consumer choices. It reflects the transfer of concerns that have traditionally been associated with the domestic sphere and social reproduction into the commercial domain. The level of societal embeddedness has intensified within GPNs as firms, with increasing knowledge and ability to coordinate their engagement with consumers, adapt to these wider changing social norms and ethics (Barnett et al., 2005; Hughes et al., 2008).

The rise of ethical consumption has an important gender dimension. Market research has indicated that 'gender socialisation' has contributed to women consumers having more relational and caring attitudes for others, reflected in their purchasing decisions (Dawson, 1992; Beetles and Harris, 2005). Women are more likely to be concerned than men about buying fair and ethical trade, with 37% of women and 34% of men caring about labour exploitation when purchasing goods (KeyNote, 2008). The rise of the ethics of care, therefore, reflects a changing gendered consumer environment. Large corporate buyers and retailers now have to balance their commercial imperative (margins and market share) with positioning in consumer markets where greater emphasis is placed on ethical concerns about the origins of the goods they source. Global production networks have facilitated the formation of cross-border networks of labour organisations, NGOs and women's organisations. These have been identified in the wider literature on labour agency and global civil society (Waterman and Wills, 2001; Howell and Pearce, 2002; Seidman, 2007). This has enhanced the ability of women-focused NGOs and unions to organise and promote women's voices through new channels. Cross-border linkages within GPNs facilitate the transmission of information about social conditions of production more easily to consumers by campaigning organisations.

Civil society actors have entered this terrain as intermediaries, raising the ethical concerns of consumers over the exploitation of a largely feminised global workforce. Civil society/corporate engagement represents a shift beyond NGO/state engagement through 'new managerialism'. This forms part of an emerging system of global governance in the wake of structural adjustment in the 1980s (Edwards and Hulme, 1995; Townsend et al., 2002). It reflects consolidation of a global 'neo-liberal' economic order, in which private companies predominate at an international level, but where corporate power remains socially contested. The formation of alliances between corporate and civil society actors engaged in ethical and fair trade has been critiqued as incorporation into company spheres of hegemony or 'community of principals' (Blowfield and Dolan, 2008; Levy, 2008). However, those critiques have focused primarily on institutionalisation through multi-stakeholder initiatives. Here we explore wider and more complex civil society/corporate interaction through strategies involving both alliances and adversarial campaigns.

The processes through which NGOs engage with companies vary across GPNs as diverse sites of bargaining and struggle, and can transcend networks involving different organisational and country participants (Nathan and Kalpana, 2007; Neilson and Pritchard, 2009). A number of civil society alliances have been formed around campaigns contesting commercial activities of multinational companies over poor labour standards. Such campaigns have been led by NGOs, such as Clean Clothes Campaign, Maquila Solidarity Network, Banana Link; and by global union federations, such as the International Union of Foodworkers and the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation. The form of these campaigns is often diverse, reflecting an array of strategies by civil society organisations seeking to mobilise consumer spending power as a means of influencing corporate behaviour (Barnett et al., 2005; Levy, 2008). Here, we focus more specifically on the gender dimension of that contestation as a crucial component of purchasing practices campaigns. In order to investigate this further, we examine two campaigns where small women-oriented NGOs played a leading role, and contrast their approaches on purchasing practices across the global North and South.

4. Targeting leverage points: Collaborative and adversarial strategies

Research was conducted in two phases, as the significance of purchasing practices became more apparent to the author. In the first phase, I did not set out specifically to examine the issue of purchasing practices. I was involved in research projects examining the impact of codes of labour practice on women workers in South African fruit and Indian garments during 2002–05. Yet, in both, the issue of purchasing practices came up as a critical challenge to the improvement of working conditions (see Barrientos and Kritzinger, 2004; Barrientos and Smith, 2007, for a more detailed exploration). The second phase built on information acquired in the first phase. It specifically explored how campaigns by civil society organisations over purchasing practices had evolved, and why they often had a strong gender focus. This second phase of research took place between 2006–08 in the UK, South Africa and India. It involved a series of key informant interviews (one or more per actor, with a total of 14 interviews) with the following: two companies, five NGOs, two multi-stakeholder initiatives. I also attended two closed workshops involving NGO and corporate actors discussing issues around purchasing practices (approximately 30 participants in each). For reasons of confidentiality the specific identity of interviewees is not being disclosed. Interviews were supplemented by NGO documentation and grey literature already in the public domain. The research did not explore events which took place after spring 2008.[4]

The case studies in phase two were selected to compare different approaches focusing on gender. One adopted a more adversarial approach, targeting the external reputational risk of corporates in consumer markets. The other pursued a more collaborative approach, involving alliances with commercial actors. Section 4.1 will explore these in more detail. The first examines an adversarial campaign spearheaded by the South African NGO, Women on Farms Project, supported by ActionAid and War on Want. The second examines collaborative engagement between the UK-based NGO, Women Working Worldwide, and Gap Inc. Following this, a comparative analysis is made of the complexities and challenges arising from civil society and corporate engagement over purchasing practices. From the perspective of GPN analysis, it examines the extent to which these challenge the commercial dynamics of global sourcing through a gender contested terrain.

4.1. 'Rotten Fruit': Women farm workers in South Africa[5]

An example of a more adversarial approach to engagement is provided by Women on Farms (WFP), a small NGO based in Stellenbosch, with nine staff members. WFP has run support programmes for women farm workers in the Cape region since the early 1990s, as well as campaigning against poor working conditions in the sector.[6] It has rallied against retrenchment and casualisation of workers following restructuring of the wine and fruit industry after apartheid, with a particular focus on the vulnerable position of women workers. As part of their strategy, WFP set up an independent trade union organisation, *Sikhula Sonke,* to promote representation of women farm workers. WFP has pursued a dual strategy of collaborative and adversarial engagement with the wine and fruit industry. It was a founding member and took up a seat on the Board of the Wine and Agriculture Ethical Trading Association (WIETA), originally founded in South Africa in 2002. WIETA is as an independent multi-stakeholder alliance of wine (later fruit) producers, trade organisations, NGOs and trade unions. It has a code of labour practice, and its main focus is provision of independent monitoring on wine estates. During 2006–08 it also included some fruit farms.[7] WIETA is recognised by UK supermarkets, including Tesco, Marks and Spencer, Co-operative, Asda and Waitrose, who are also members (McEwen and Bek, 2009).

As part of the research for the Oxfam report, *Trading Away Our Rights*, Women on Farms conducted research on the position of women farm workers in UK supermarket value chains (Greenberg, 2004; Oxfam, 2004). Women on Farms subsequently linked up with two UK NGOs, ActionAid and War on Want. They were also pursuing a campaign against large UK supermarkets in relation to the adverse effects of their buying practices on suppliers and workers, with a particular focus on Tesco. This campaign was conducted in the full glare of media publicity, including lobbying a shareholder meeting, and hosting a visit by the actor Emma Thompson to South Africa. WFP issued a report documenting their grievances, which was challenged by Tesco because WFP and ActionAid refused to name individual farms or farm workers, for fear of reprisal (ActionAid, 2005; Mogaladi, 2008).

Subsequently, one farm worker did agree to be named. As part of the campaign, ActionAid helped WFP to buy three shares in Tesco. The shares were acquired in the names of Fatima Shabodien (Executive Director), Wendy Pekeur (General Secretary of Sikhula Sonke) and Gertruida Baartman, a seasonal fruit picker on a Tesco-supplying farm in Ceres. In 2006, Gertruida Baartman attended the Tesco shareholders Annual General Meeting (AGM) in London, where she raised the issue of poor working conditions experienced by farm workers on certain Tesco-supplying farms (Mesure, 2006). Following this, Tesco senior executives agreed to meet members of WFP, but said they had found no proof of the allegations during a visit to South Africa (Mesure, 2006).

In 2007, Gertruida again addressed the Tesco AGM. As a response to the issues raised, Tesco agreed that future social auditing of its suppliers in South Africa should be undertaken by

[4] Research in the second phase was supported by the *Pathways to Womens' Empowerment* programme funded by the Department of International Development. The author takes sole responsibility for the findings and views reported here.

[5] 'Rotten Fruit' is the title of the ActionAid report on South African women farm workers (see ActionAid, 2005).

[6] For more information on Women on Farms, see: http://www.wfp.org.za/ (accessed October 2011).

[7] For more information on WIETA, see http://www.wieta.org.za/ (accessed October 2011). In 2006–08, WIETA covered wine and fruit, but it subsequently focused on wine following tensions with sections of the fruit industry, arising in part from the campaigns discussed here. These events took place after this research was conducted, and are not examined in this paper.

local auditors with greater awareness of gender issues. It involved WIETA in this process, although as a small organisation it lacked the capacity to undertake the large number of audits required to cover all Tesco's supply base in South Africa. ActionAid and War on Want continued to support WFP and provide media exposure for their campaign around women farm workers. ActionAid focused on fruit workers, and War on Want on raising the plight of workers on wine estates in the same area.[8]

This case provides insights into the commercial leverage that civil society organisations have sought to exploit by targeting the reputational risk of lead firms. Risk avoidance has been highlighted through value chain analysis as a reason for adoption of corporate standards. Civil society activists have long used the threat of exposure as a means to pressure companies to address workers' rights in their value chains (Barrientos, 2000). Highlighting women and migrant workers in these campaigns results from their concentration in more casualised forms of employment, where poor working conditions and lack of rights are often greatest. Shining a light on marginalised (often hidden) workers has revealed some of the deleterious aspects of global outsourcing. Within GPNs, civil society organisations have been able to use their increasing commercial knowledge and global/local linkages to target the weak points of companies in their campaigns for workers' rights.

4.2. 'Bridging the Gap': Managing supply for apparel workers[9]

An example of a more collaborative approach is provided by the alliance between Women Working Worldwide and Gap Inc., reflecting a shift in Gap's corporate strategy. Gap first introduced its company code of labour practice and compliance programme in 1992. At that time Gap was a major target for civil society organisations campaigning against abuse of workers' rights. A number of factors contributed to the targeting of Gap. Firstly, it was a high profile US brand with global reach. It owned a large number of stores across the USA, Canada, Europe and Japan, appealing to a modern, young middle-income life-style. It typified a 'buyer driven' global value chain, as identified by Gereffi (1994), owning no production units of its own, but sourcing from a large number of (often poor) developing countries. Between 1995 and 2000, Gap faced exposures for labour abuse in its value chain in El Salvador and Saipan, culminating in a BBC Panorama programme on the use of child labour in a supplier factory in Cambodia. Its stores were one of the targets of anti-globalisation demonstrations outside the WTO summit in Seattle in 1999. A significant shift took place in the company's approach after 2001. It began to engage in external dialogue with its critics through a newly established Global Partnerships programme (Ansett, 2007). It subsequently became active in a number of multi-stakeholder initiatives, including Social Accountability International (SAI), the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Better Factory Programme.

Prior to Gap joining ETI, Women Working Worldwide (WWW) a small UK-based NGO (with four staff members) took up the issue of corporate purchasing practices, focusing on Gap (WWW, 2003). Subsequently the ETI established its Purchasing Practices working group in 2005, with both Gap and WWW joining as company and NGO members. As part of the work of this group, Gap commissioned WWW to undertake a gendered 'critical path' analysis of its value chain. Critical path is a management term for the series of interlinked time-critical tasks performed across a GVC to bring a good from production to market (Hughes et al., 2010). WWW set out to examine where and how commercial decisions in one part of the value chain might impact on a largely female workforce elsewhere. The aim was to provide commercially sustainable recommendations that helped to improve workers' lives. Summary conclusions from the study included the need to address unforeseen delays that undermine factories completing orders on time, and sudden changes to production orders (such as design or volume alterations) after production has begun. Factories were also found to be wanting on production planning, exacerbating problems. Gap realised that, together, these inefficiencies can lead to quality problems, increased cost, and the use of illegal subcontracting or temporary workers to meet production demands. Factory compliance with Gap Inc.'s Code of Vendor Conduct can also be strained by the need for increased overtime and higher production targets from factory workers, which may correlate with higher incidents of underpayment or non-payment of overtime (Gap, 2006, p. 29). Gap committed to addressing issues raised in the report in the management of its supplier relations, to enhance both social and commercial dimensions of its value chain. Gap also found that changes to its purchasing practices enhanced efficiency within its value chain (ETI, 2005; Gap, 2006; Raworth and Kidder, 2009; Hughes et al., 2010).

This case highlights the way some companies have responded proactively to challenges over poor working conditions associated with their own purchasing practices. It indicates that some large companies have become more socially responsive, reflecting societal embeddedness in the markets in which they sell and source their product ranges. Consumer-oriented firms positioning themselves in these changing market environments, can appeal to differentiated groups of consumers. In countries such as the US and UK, women undertake the majority of consumer purchases, and have been found to be more responsive than men in relation to the conditions under which goods are produced. Through its engagement with WWW, Gap has responded to both the commercial and social dynamics operating through its global outsourcing.

5. Strategic alliances within global production networks

These case studies highlight some of the processes, opportunities and challenges for civil society engagement with corporate actors in the context of global production networks. The purchasing practices campaign has shifted the terrain of civil society engagement with companies beyond the fringes of social compliance by suppliers into the mainstream of their commercial activities. Yet this engagement between commercial and social actors has taken place on a gender contested terrain. We will now reflect on the implications of this engagement for campaigns to address the rights and empowerment of women workers in increasingly commercialised global production networks.

The ability to form alliances has proved crucial to small women's organisations such as WWW and WFP, who alone have few resources and little voice. Through networks involving larger civil society actors, they have been able to exploit new leverage points, in order to address the adverse effects of purchasing practices on women workers. In the case of WWW, these alliances have been enhanced through its membership of the ETI. This facilitated its participation in the ETI Purchasing Practices working group, and its subsequent collaboration with Gap. In the case of WFP, global alliances were initially built through links with Oxfam, followed by ActionAid and War on Want. The latter NGOs have decided strategically to remain outside multi-stakeholder initiatives such as the ETI.

The strategies adopted by NGOs in relation to companies depend in part on their positioning in relation to the leverage points opened up within GPNs. A GPN involves a series of interconnected nodes that integrate disparate commercial and social actors, nationally and locally (Coe et al., 2008). These nodes are points of both strength and weakness for corporate buyers. Within tight just-in-

[8] See War on Want: http://www.waronwant.org/overseas-work/food-justice/women-farm-workers-in-south-africa (accessed October 2011).

[9] The title of the WWW study on women workers in Gap Inc.'s value chain (see Hurley, 2003).

time commercial operations they facilitate rapid flows of goods across international boundaries. But a small disjuncture at one node can quickly have adverse repercussions elsewhere. Integration within GPNs means that a corporate brand is at reputational risk from adversarial campaigns, even if the 'problem' occurred at a distant node. NGOs and trade unions have become adept at analysing the operation of company value chains in order to identify nodes where, with limited resources, they can leverage change. From an adversarial perspective, leverage was found through WoF placing a farmworker in a Tesco shareholder meeting, linking production and financial nodes. From a collaborative perspective, leverage was found through WWW's critical-path analysis identifying how a design change could impact on women workers.

GPN analysis also highlights shifting tensions between the commercial and social dimensions of sourcing. This is reflected in multiple strategies that a single actor might adopt at different times, as shown by both WWW's engagement with Gap and WFP's engagement with Tesco. WWW initially took a critical stance in relation to Gap, producing critical reports on its purchasing practices. Likewise, Gap had initially stood aloof from civil society engagement. The position of both organisations changed once Gap joined the ETI and participated along with WWW in its Purchasing Practices working group. WFP was a Board member of WIETA, of which Tesco was also a member, at the same time as it was engaged in Oxfam and later ActionAid/War on Want campaigns against Tesco.[10] From a GPN perspective, commercial–social interlinkages and tensions are also reflected in company strategies. Responsiveness to NGO campaigns is not simply to avoid risk, but also results from wider strategies of social engagement shaped by their societal embeddedness. As consumer-oriented companies seeking to expand market share, both Tesco and Gap needed to cater to both consumers' perceived product requirements and their social and moral concerns. Women are an important segment of their consumer base, albeit with differentiated socio-economic and income profiles. In certain market segments, this means selling products whose origins are certified as socially and environmentally beneficial, or at least are *not* perceived as detrimental to those involved in their production.

Commercial and societal pressures extend beyond their narrow consumer markets. They also have to satisfy city investors and shareholders, where pension and ethical investment funds are asking more questions about corporate social responsibility (Palpacuer, 2008). This concern was reflected by Insight Investment (a financial asset manager) commissioning the Acona report on purchasing practices. Gap's collaboration with WWW is one strand of its growing engagement with civil society organisations. It espouses a company ethos aimed at caring for people and the planet that enhances its appeal to a young and aware consumer audience. When Tesco was confronted in a shareholder meeting by a farm worker from South Africa, its response was dialogue rather than ejection. This approach chimed with its stated position of applying high ethical standards within its supply base. The changing commercial dynamics of the markets in which they operate require companies to be more alert and responsive to social issues in both their external and internal operations. In this context, gender-focused campaigns around purchasing practices have touched a nerve, which has helped to propel their momentum and raise their profile.

6. Concluding remarks

The pursuit of diverse strategies around purchasing practices raises a wider challenge for NGOs. To what extent are they able to challenge the commercial model underpinning GPNs, or are they being incorporated within evolving corporate strategies of social engagement which limits their impact? This must surely be a risk in GPNs, where social embeddedness of commercial activity leads companies to adapt to diverse social norms and institutions, and strive to engage with critical actors. But the case studies examined here highlight that this is a continually contested terrain, with some actors 'on the inside' working with companies to change their business practices, and others 'on the outside' in pursuit of adversarial campaigns targeting brand image. The combination of different strategies keeps companies both alert to risk and responsive to social trends and consumer awareness, leaving them more open to modifying their operations. But there is always a tension in relation to their commercial imperative.

One outcome has been the growth of ethical and fair-trade initiatives, which institutionalise goals of fairness and justice through multi-stakeholder engagement within mainstream value chains (Barrientos and Smith, 2007). Such initiatives have been criticised for their limited impact on more marginal groups, and adaptation to new forms of global governance dominated by corporates (Blowfield and Dolan, 2008). However, purchasing practices campaigns extend beyond the narrow confines of corporate codes and, whether pursued through alliances or adversarial strategies, target the heart of commercial activity in GPNs. It could be argued that contemporary CSO/corporate engagement reflects an era where corporate business practices are rebounding in a Polanyian 'double movement', as transnational alliances of social actors seek to check global commercial excesses (Mayer and Pickles, 2010). That 'double movement', as highlighted in this paper, has important gender dimensions. The socially subordinate position of women workers entering paid employment in GPNs has allowed them to be exploited as a cheap labour force at the brunt end of purchasing practices. At the same time, women's greater labour force participation and access to global social networking has opened up channels to raise women's voices, and to facilitate new forms of gendered civil society campaigning (Barrientos et al., 2003; Beneria, 2007). The fact that women-oriented NGOs have often played a key role in this engagement is therefore not a coincidence.

However, it could be argued there is a transformative gender process taking place beneath the surface, reflected in a wider terrain of gender contestation, such as campaigns around purchasing practices. Women are experiencing intense pressures as workers, carers and consumers, but, as Beneria (2007) notes, globalisation is also undermining many of the patriarchal controls that traditionally repressed them. Small changes in the commercial functioning of GPNs can have big impacts on women workers' daily lives, motivating their continued value chain struggles. Women constitute a growing voice for a more caring commercial environment. Companies ignore this at their cost if they want to expand market share in more socially aware environments, where women increasingly participate as informed workers, consumers and activists.

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[10] Straddling different strategies can cause tensions within multi-stakeholder organisations such as ETI and WIETA. For more detailed examination of such MSIs see for example McEwen and Bek (2009).

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